

# FENCING: A Sport With A Romantic History

## Radio Talk Debunks d'Artagnan

*Fencing must almost be New Zealand's youngest sport, for last month the Association held only its second national championship. But if it is comparatively new to New Zealand, it is one of the oldest sports in the Old World.*

*Among others, d'Artagnan was debunked by Gordon Mirams in his radio talk before the championships; but if he crossed out some popular misconceptions, he put a clear idea of what is still an unusual sport in their place.*

*This is a condensation of his script:*

**M**OST people these days know the difference between the kind of fencing which means putting posts round a paddock, and the kind of fencing which involves two persons in a polite argument with swords.

But it wasn't always like that. Only a comparatively few years ago a fencer asked in one of the biggest bookshops in Christchurch for some literature on fencing and the man behind the counter produced a copy of the Fencing Act of 1890, or thereabouts, as well as something on the best way to put up barbed-wire.

Fencing still isn't a widely-known or a widely practised sport but at the same time its popularity in this country has grown quite a lot in the last ten years and the fencing tournament is quite an important part of every Olympic Games meeting. They've always been enthusiastic about it on the Continent of Europe, but now it's also being taken up with a great deal of gusto by film stars, fat business men, office girls and husky university students in England, America and Australia as well. Golfers find that it strengthens the wrists; and Oldfield has found that it develops quickness of the eye and helps him with his wicket-keeping.

### Not a "Sissy" Sport

Many women find fencing one very useful way toward achieving the Body Beautiful; but it is not a "sissy" kind of sport, just because women can take as much part in it as men. It would be hard to find a more strenuous or more vigorous exercise.

There is one point on which most will agree; fencing can put it over most other sports with its romantic history. The history of fencing is completely bound up with the history of duelling and the custom of single combat. When most people think about fencing they link it up with all the stories about sword-fighting by Dumas and Sabatini, and all the Hollywood films they've seen showing Errol Flynn or Douglas Fairbanks or Ronald Colman dashing about all over the screen with the heroine tucked under one arm, while with the other he plunges a rapier into half-a-dozen opponents one after another.

It's always very exciting to watch, this business of a Hollywood hero holding a whole roomful of men at bay single-handed; but in real life it just could not be done. In a narrow and confined space—such as at the top of a flight of stairs—a good swordsman might be able to hold his own for a while against a massed attack; but even the great d'Artagnan himself—or any of the Three Musketeers for that matter—wouldn't have been able to tackle three or four opponents at once and get away with it. They certainly wouldn't have been able to do half the things Hollywood has made them do from time to time.

### Polite Murder

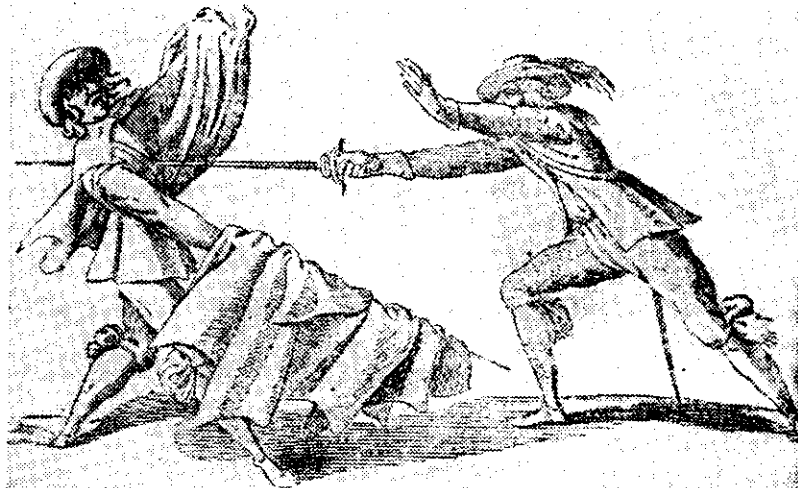
Still this association with the past gives modern fencing a kind of romantic glamour which no other sport can claim to possess. It has also had a very big influence on the sport itself. Fencing is a very polite sport. During a tournament everybody seems to be saluting everybody else, and there are plenty of people standing around to see fair play.

The reason: sword-fighting was once a very polite form of murder. Everybody who claimed to be a gentleman used to be trained in fencing, not because the exercise was good for him, but because, if he wanted to keep a whole skin, he had to know how to use a sword.

Nowadays nobody really learns how to fence in order to be able to fight duels, except in Germany—where the Nazis some time ago revived it as a part of the legal code.

### Revival in New Zealand

The revival of interest in the sport in New Zealand can be traced to Christchurch, in the year 1927, when a few enthusiasts formed a club at Canterbury University College. From that its popularity has spread until there is now a New Zealand Amateur Fencing Association. The first annual championships were run by the Association in Christchurch last year, when clubs from all over the country took part. For this year's championships in Wellington the representation was not quite so good, because of the war; but if the quantity of fencers was slightly less, the quality of the fencing was rather better. The Association is looking forward to the day when it will send a team from New Zealand to compete against the world's best swordsmen in the Olympic Games.



*This kind of thing doesn't happen nowadays, but in early duels the cloak was often used as an adjunct to the rapier. It was usually wound twice round the left forearm and parries were made with it. But sometimes, as shown in this old print, it was thrown to paralyse the adversary's attack—with drastic results*

### The Three Weapons

In fencing there are three different types of weapon used. First of all there is the foil; and this is the most popular weapon of all in New Zealand. It is the prettiest weapon to watch, the most delicate to handle, and in its original form of the small-sword, it was the deadliest bodkin of them all.

Then comes the sabre, which is a cutting weapon as well as a thrusting one, and so the edge is used as well as the point. A sabre bout is probably the most exciting kind of fencing to watch, because it is fast and spectacular and there is plenty of noise. It is the kind of sword-fighting seen most often in the films. Thirdly there's the épée. With the épée, like the foil, all hits must be scored with the point. But unlike the foil, the target isn't restricted—and a hit on any part of the body, even the big toe, is counted. An épée is the modern duelling weapon.

### No Broken Necks Now

Where are fencing matches fought? They're fought in a measured area called the "piste," and it's the equivalent of the boxing or wrestling ring. The length and breadth and so on are all strictly fixed by international rules. In the more vigorous days of fencing, they sometimes used to fight on a platform raised so high off the ground that if a man stepped back too far to avoid his opponent's lunge he ran the risk of falling over the edge and breaking his neck instead. No doubt this gave the spectators an extra thrill; and if it were done to-day it might have the advantage of teaching young fencers to stand their ground better. But even without such thrills as this, modern fencing is a very fascinating and scientific sport, and there's a great deal more to it than simply banging a couple of foils together.

## BOXING NEWS

**I**N a recent American ranking of heavy-weight boxers, Maurie Strickland's name appears seventh on the list. Tony Galento is still No. 1 contender, but most agree he will get no closer to the title while Louis stays in the way.

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Lex Greaney, Dunedin feather-weight who holds the title in his division, is without fights in the offing. A good type of boxer, Greaney finds opponents very scarce.

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Neville Mudgway, ex-welterweight champion of the Dominion, has a stall at the Exhibition.

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Gisborne is again in the limelight. Vic Caltaux and Jack Davis will provide the main bout at a tourney in December.

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Little is heard of Primo Carnera these days. He retains a connection with the game. A large sign over his tavern door intimates that he was once "champion of the world."

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Maurice Costello, six feet tall and just 14½ stone of bone and muscle, is training in a Wellington gym for any bouts that offer. Costello is a good-natured Irishman, and his scrap-book shows he has a good record.

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Boxing is beginning to find favour in the military camps. It is proposed to hold tournaments shortly in at least two camps.

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Professional boxing on the West Coast has been somewhat quiet this season but the amateurs have been well catered for by a body of sportsmen who recognise that amateur boxing is their first concern. Many brilliant professionals who made a name for themselves in New Zealand boxing graduated from the amateur ranks on the Coast.